

A Co-operative Plan That Worked

By EDWARD SCHULER

Ghent, Belgium, November—(By Mail). **A**T A TIME when the many problems of national restoration are directing the attention of the public to labor organizations, it is interesting to examine the activities of one of them, a Socialist co-operative society, unique as it is powerful. Socialism, sometimes associated with dreamy projects or a sort of vagueness, here is practical. Forward, or the Flemish *Vooruit* is its name, and it lives up to it, in war as in peace.

It was in 1880 that an association of some workers was formed with the object of creating a co-operative bakery and also of improving the situation of workers in general.

Ghent, industrial and manufacturing center of the entire Flemish region, is one of those busy, smoky cities, whose feverish activity is everywhere manifest. At the time referred to, the laboring class here was compelled to live under the most miserable conditions. The worker, absolutely illiterate, serif incapable of throwing off his yoke, was obliged to put in from 12 to 14 hours a day. His wage amounted to two francs and several centimes (about 40 cents). His abode was nothing less than one of those foul tenements to be found in large cities where disease and death, aided by alcohol, claim numerous victims.

It is in these surroundings and under such conditions that this emancipating movement began. First, vague ideas began to germinate among these enslaved persons, signs of intelligence manifested themselves and initiatives followed. In 1873, a number of artisans founded the co-operative bakery, *De Vrye Bakkers*. Several years later there was a split among the members of this group on the subject of policy, and a separation occurred. A new group was formed, and thus *Le Vooruit* came into being. It had as leaders Edmond Van Beveren, painter, and Edouard Anseele, printer. As capital, it boasted only \$14. Fortunately, the fraternal society of weavers, coming to the rescue, loaned the members \$400, and out of that came the present big organization with its large buildings, its diverse institutions, its numerous branches, its many and growing *oeuvres*, more powerful than ever. *Le Vooruit* has today 11,000 members. From the little bakery of fortune, installed formerly in the court of a cabaret in the rue St. Gilles, have come the following establishments: a large bread manufactory, six pharmacies, five clothing shops, twenty-six groceries, a meat and pork butcher shop, a shoe manufactory, seven cafés, a library, a printing establishment, the newspaper *Vooruit*, a bank, etc. To define the character of such a work, one generally quotes Anseele, who said: "It is a fortress from which society is bombarded with potatoes and two-pound loaves of bread."

This man, Edouard Anseele, who was the initiator, the intrepid leader who sustained the enterprise dur-

ing all its difficulties, has remained the soul of the venture. Today, Minister of the Belgian Government and at the same time supreme chief of the largest co-operative organization in the country, he must think with an affecting smile of the hard struggle, of the days when he administered the *Vooruit* without retribution, by devotion, by vocation. It was only in 1887 that the post of a paid director was created. His salary was fixed at \$5.60 a week.

In imitation of the "Equitable Pioneers of Rochdale," in England, *Vooruit* was one of the first and surely the most fruitful co-operative organizations in Belgium. Its success did not fail to provoke emulation abroad. Here are the results in detail:

The bakery, first fruit of the enterprise, developed with growing rapidity. After various transfers the bread manufactory was established definitely in the present buildings. The receipts of this branch, which employs 100 workers and makes 120,000 loaves of bread a week, were \$631,741.40 in 1917. The coal depot, close by, did business amounting to \$202,476.20 in 1915.

Then there are the large buildings of the workers *Ons Huis*. This edifice, situated at the *Marché du Vendredi* (Friday market), veritable general headquarters of Socialist societies, is in a way the heart of the whole Ghent Co-operative Organization. Besides the large café on the ground floor, there are the administrative offices of *Vooruit*, and the library subsidized by the city. It has a thousand readers a week, and lends annually 25,000 volumes a week. There are two large meeting rooms and quarters for the secretaries of all the Ghent unions.

Adjoining this building is another structure housing the shops after which there are the branches enumerated above. Finally, the buildings for fêtes. The most important of these is the *Palais des Fêtes*, a large new edifice comprising two rooms for spectacles, holding respectively 1,000 and 1,600 persons, with a foyer on each floor and a dance hall with its smoking room. A picturesque feature remains yet to be mentioned. It is assured by a curious idea to endow a proletarian association with a château to allow the members to enjoy healthy Sunday amusements. It had much success before the war. But how many things would have to be noted if we were introduced into each cell of this big "beehive." Let us cut short in the center of the *oeuvre* and enter the administration. In an office of the *Hôtel de Ville* is the service of "population," where in large, strong boxes are aligned the registers of the status of the members. Then there is the Pension Service, an important branch. *Le Vooruit*, in fact, has created an entire series of aid funds and insurance

whose essential character is its freedom of any cost whatever to the members. The simple purchase of the products of the organization suffices to assure the co-operators the benefits of these foundations. There is a Mothers Aid, a Sick Fund, an Invalids Aid, an Old Age Pension, and life insurance. All that is admirably conceived and organized.

During the war, there has been no cessation of activity in this big, animated body. It is true that the shops have been bare of stocks through requisitions and lack of supplies. But on the whole, the *oeuvre* has shown an unalterable vitality despite the horrors of war.

In 1915, there was an increase of 1,526 in the number of members. A butcher shop was opened. The total business done amounted to \$305,007.60. This amount was further increased in the following year to \$169,464. New members continued to be added. Their number reached 11,862 in 1916; in 1917, 13,628, and in 1918, 14,225.

An initiative particularly interesting is that of the official loan contracted by the *Vooruit*. The city of Ghent consented, with the approval of the government, to a loan of \$160,000 to the Co-operative. To assure the reimbursement of this sum, bonds of \$200 denomination were issued at four per cent. In 1916, \$20,000 was repaid. It is to be noted, moreover, that despite all the difficulties created by war, the enterprise remained sufficiently prosperous to pay to its members, for the business year 1916-1917 the sum of \$17,515.40.

The *oeuvre* also aids several other enterprises in the weaving and flax spinning trades, besides having participated in the creation of an industrial high school.

It goes without saying that such an endeavor, having attained the power it has, becomes an organ essential to the life of a city and of a region. At this time, stocks of American shoes are reaching *Vooruit*. Immediately, the large shops of the *Place du Vendredi* are offering these goods at such prices as to impose a general reduction throughout the city. And this is the same in every branch.

The geographical situation of Ghent is also favorable to the development of the Co-operative. Ghent is a very live port whose activity is reflected throughout Belgium. In 1913 (last normal year), 1,347 seagoing ships with about 1,000,000 tonnage entered Ghent.

These details will suffice to give an idea of the large place held by the workers' organization in the economic life of an industrial region, and the rôle reserved for it in the future.

It remains for us to admire the spirit of this effort. Like the pioneers of Rochdale, already mentioned, the Ghent promoters had an intuition that the improvement in working conditions could not be more surely obtained than by a slow and peaceful effort at emancipation in working together. And that is the work of *Vooruit*!

Woman's Progress—From Clay Pipe to Cigaret

SOME of us remember the old lady who lived in a tumble-down shack around the corner near the edge of town—the aged dame to whom our mothers referred as "old Mrs. Flaherty"—whose great attraction was that she smoked a pipe. An endless fascination clothed that pipe, for we had never known before that women smoked, and Mrs. Flaherty was the only one in all our town who practiced that accomplishment. It was a little old clay pipe, burned black with many smokings, and its bowl assumed a rakish slant from the old woman's lips. The stem had been broken short, so that the smoke seemed to curl directly under her nose, and the operation was accompanied by two sounds, hypnotic in their power upon youthful beholders—the soft sound of suction as she drew the draught, and the softer "putt-putt" of her lips as she expelled the smoke.

How well we remember her now, and seem to see her again, sitting on the old low bench along the sunny side of the house, her aged shoulders bent, her elbows on her knees, her dim and deep-set eyes locked upon things invisible. Behind that wrinkled forehead must have floated thoughts and memories which, had we been old enough to fancy them, would have crowned the old lady with tenderness. We did not know then that she was smoking her pipe in a strange land, and that even the little boys who stood around and stared were strange, and that in her country the children would not have done that. But the five pleasant old mothers portrayed here are not Irish ladies, but Belgians. And yet the second one from the left, who sits



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so meditatively, holding her pipe with one hand and her elbow with the other, reminds one very much of old Mrs. Flaherty—only Mrs. Flaherty's pipe was black, and the stem was broken short. But maybe this old Belgian lady procured a new pipe for the purpose of this picture, just as she might have put on her best shawl; although the other ladies seem to have well blackened their pipes. One misses the short stem, however; the picture would seem much more natural to at least one man, if one of the pipes drooped nearly

smoke cigarettes. It used to be that they smoked in the privacy of their rooms, and very risqué photographs were once printed of daring women using the weed in private. But by-and-by, they grew bolder and began to smoke in the café and at the dinner table. Now, those who smoke at all, smoke anywhere they please. In certain circles which, because of their wealth and station, are referred to as the "higher" circles, many of the women smoke like the men—incessantly, promiscuously, anywhere, anything.

beneath the matronly smoker's nose.

These old ladies are smoking on the outskirts of Liege, a name that one day leaped in fire to the mind of the world. These old women endured suffering and saw things that killed younger and more sensitive women outright. They are able to meet now in the gardens on the outskirts of the town, each bringing her own tobacco (all they share is a "light") and talk about the things which befell them in their latter years. They make a good-looking group. Old mothers always have a look upon them that is somehow deeper and more satisfying than the most radiant youthful beauty.

The boy who used to stand and regard with awe the tobacco habit of Mrs. Flaherty is now regarding—with a feeling quite other than awe—the revival of the tobacco habit among women. Someone has said that it is only three generations between shirt-sleeves and shirt-sleeves, meaning that money lasts about that long. Well, about the same time has elapsed between clay pipe and cigarettes. Mrs. Flaherty smoked a stained, encrusted clay pipe; "the fine young ladies," as she would have called them,